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Author(s): Hanhikoski, Essi; Sevón, Eija

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Early childhood education and care teachers' narratives of their professional identity

Essi Hanhikoski[a] & Eija Sevón[b]

[a] University of Jyväskylä, corresponding author, e-mail: essi.a.hanhikoski@jyu.fi, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1750-1069
[b] University of Jyväskylä, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6749-8478

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this narrative study was to examine early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers' narratives of their professional identity. The aim was to use six narrative interviews to find out how ECEC teachers narrate their professional identity and which experiences are relevant in shaping their professional identity. In the study, identity is seen as a social construction and a narratively structured process that takes shape throughout life. As a result of the narrative analysis, three types of stories describing teachers' professional identity emerged: Biographical stories, Value stories and Interaction stories. Based on the findings, the core value of acting in the best interests of the child is an integral part of ECEC teachers' professional identity, while scarce organizational resources and interactional conflicts challenge ECEC teachers' professional identity. Professional agency, that is, the opportunity to act in accordance with professional ethics and one's values in collaboration with a multiprofessional team and colleagues, plays an important role.

Keywords: *early childhood education teachers, narratives, professional identity, working conditions*

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Introduction

Volatile career prospects and labor market policies seem to force professionals to remain flexible and tolerate change (Kira & Balkin, 2014; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020), which challenges teachers' professional identities in early childhood education and care (ECEC) (see Beijaard et al., 2004; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Therefore, the instability in working life causes continuous identity negotiation for teachers (Vähäsantanen, 2015). In the Finnish ECEC context, the professionals' work identities are formed in an environment characterized by hurry, unclear job organization and descriptions, and change (Kangas et al., 2022; Karila & Kupila, 2010; Suvanto et al., 2021; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). The work of an ECEC teacher is determined by the management of multidisciplinary teamwork and responsibility for the implementation of pedagogy in a child group (Fonsén et al., 2021; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020). Research conducted in the Finnish context has defined and identified the multiplicity of ECEC teachers' roles, and heightened demands for various pedagogical, substance, generic and interaction competences, and expertise (e.g., Ranta et al., 2023; Suvanto et al., 2021). In our study, we consider ECEC teachers to build their professional identity in the context of daily work and demands. However, this context includes micro-level tensions, such as struggles between different professional groups, which are linked to larger macro-level phenomena such as legislation and staff qualifications (Onnismaa, 2005; Onnismaa, Tahkokallio, et al., 2017). At the same time, balancing the tension between planned pedagogy and financial constraints is also reflected in ECEC professionals' interpretations of the values at work (Hjelt, 2023; Hjelt & Karila, 2017; Kangas et al., 2022; Sirviö et al., 2023). Due to this complex and contradictory professional and relational landscape, ECEC teachers may find it challenging to construct their professional identity embedded in the cultural and societal conditions of the present-day ECEC institution in Finland.

Recent studies related to Finnish ECEC teachers have been focused on the professional competencies and relational expertise (e.g., Ranta et al., 2023; Suvanto et al., 2021; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020), however, studies related to ECEC teachers' professional identities remain scarce. This study provides an insight into what aforementioned aspects are meaningful for the construction of the ECEC teacher's professional identity of today. In this study we approach ECEC teachers' professional identities as a narrative meaning-making process constructed in interaction. The data constructed of six ECEC teachers' personal narratives in which the societal changes, social relationships and struggles, and their situated interpretations became intermingled. Furthermore, personal narratives always have an ethical stance (Bamberg, 2012). By identifying and bringing together the key aspects of professional identity, it can be seen as a concept bridging the diverse aspects of ECEC teachers' work as a temporal, ethical and relational whole. Therefore, it

highlights the importance of the professional identity construction in need of support already from pre-service teacher education to a constantly changing working life in ECEC.

The narrative nature of professional identity

In this study, the construction of professional identity is examined from the perspective of social constructionism, as identity is seen to develop in the interaction of social and individual processes (Deppermann, 2013; Gergen, 2011). Instead of being a permanent feature of the individual, identity is seen as a dynamic, life-long process shaped by the environment and social relationships (Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Therefore, identity is a context-bound phenomenon with a social, spatial, and temporal dimension (Esteban-Guitart, 2012). Identity seeks to answer the question "Who am I?" (Beijaard et al., 2004). According to Ricoeur (1991), life can only be understood through the stories people tell. One can reflect on their life through the narrative understanding used to build their identity. Indeed, identity can be seen as a life story including a temporal dimension—past, present, and future, offering consistency, unity, and similarity throughout the series of life events (Cochran, 1997). Kraus (2006, p. 104) describes the development of identity as "a story without a final solution that is constantly open to change".

The current perception of the nature of identity as an ever-changing process (see e.g., Bamberg, 2012; Beijaard et al., 2004; Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Kraus, 2006; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012) is also the starting point for examining professional identity in this study. More specifically, the professional identity of an ECEC teacher is shaped by the interaction between the operating environment of ECEC organizations and the teacher (Karila & Kupila, 2010). Professional identity is associated with the prospects of a professional, i.e., a vision of how and what kind of professional a person wants to grow into (Cochran, 1997). According to Heggen and Terum (2017), receiving a formal qualification through education is an essential part of building a professional identity. Cochran (1997), Savickas (2005), and Meijers and Lengelle (2012) also define professional identity as narrative through a career story. The career story tells "How the self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the self of tomorrow" (Savickas, 2005, p. 58).

Eteläpelto et al. (2014) have identified contextual and self-related factors influencing professional identity negotiations. The professional identity of ECEC teachers is affected by the prevailing working conditions and the predominant values and norms in society. Professional identity consists of a person's goals, values, and interests, as well as ethical principles and commitments (Vähäsantanen et al., 2017). Eteläpelto et al. (2014) describe what an individual is or wants to be in their work, based on their own values and the things they consider important in relation to themselves and others. The environmental

factors include the prevailing discourses, members of the work community, physical and material conditions, and work cultures and practices. Factors that affect the individual's self-negotiation of professional identity include professional commitments, ideals, values and goals, work history, and one's own professional competence and expertise. (Eteläpelto et al., 2014).

When negotiating professional identity, it is essential that a person can act according to their own values, as well as the realization of one's own professional goals at work (Vähäsantanen et al., 2017). The changes in the Finnish society and ECEC have an influence on how the role of the teacher is perceived. These perceptions turn into prevailing thought patterns and values, also called master narratives, reflect the values and norms of society, embodying moral order, i.e., which stories we value over others (Hammack, 2011; Squire et al., 2013). Master narratives have power over personal narratives and identities, and a particular impact on the shape of the individual's professional identity (Deppermann, 2013; Hammack, 2011). Therefore, the ability to reflect is important in expertise, as it is essential that the individual can question the values or practices provided by master narratives (Tahkokallio, 2014).

Critical incidences and career turning events are central to the construction of professional identity and are often related to questioning of established practices or the inability to control the situation and its requirements (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012; Tahkokallio, 2014). Professional identity can be seen as the sum of professional socialization during education, prevailing collective professional identity, career experiences, and individual reflection (Granrusten, 2016), and professional identity is constructed and changed through learning processes. For these learning processes, the individual needs dialogue and reflection with both their self and others (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). When an individual defines themself, they simultaneously position their own self in relation to others (Bamberg, 2012; Deppermann, 2013). In this case, when the ECEC teacher speaks of their self, they build it in relation to other ECEC teachers and other professional groups in ECEC.

The development of professional identity and learning at work are inextricably linked and promoted through the possibilities to take part in and influence the practices in the workplace (Collin et al., 2008). Professional identity is a phenomenon characterized not only by a state of permanence and stability, but also by the changes during teachers' careers (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). Therefore, the possibility of professional identity negotiations is related to learning and experiencing the meaning at work (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Tahkokallio (2014) states that the professional development of ECEC teachers is enabled through systematic observation of children. This encourages the teacher to self-reflect, thereby providing the opportunity for change and development (Tahkokallio, 2014). When a person's professional goals and interests are in line with the

contents of the work, the work is perceived as emotionally meaningful (Eteläpelto et al., 2014).

Indeed, the work of ECEC teacher has an ethical nature (Niikko & Korhonen, 2021). Recent studies demonstrate that ECEC practitioners' value their encounters with the child, and possibilities to work towards the best interest and holistic wellbeing of the child (e.g., Hjelt & Karila, 2017; Rosqvist et al., 2019). However, the demands for flexibility and effectiveness shape ECEC work, as professionals balance between the quality of work and the management of available resources (Hjelt & Karila, 2017; Hjelt, 2023; Kangas et al., 2022). Additionally, when considering the professional identity of an ECEC teacher, it is important to understand its relationship to the tensions between different professional groups in ECEC (Kupila, 2007; Sirviö et al., 2023). The tension between the discourses of social work and teaching (Onnismaa, 2005) has put a particular mark on ECEC teacher identity, which has also reflected on the multi-professional working community in ECEC organizations and, through this, in the expectations we place on the work of ECEC teachers.

In addition, unclear working roles and responsibilities have challenged the formation of ECEC teachers' identities (Karila & Kupila, 2010). ECEC teachers construct their identities in the context of their daily work, which includes multidisciplinary teams and collaboration between practitioners. However, the interpretation of multidisciplinarity in the field of ECEC has been very diverse, and in practice, multidisciplinary has occasionally been interpreted to mean that everyone does everything regardless of their educational background, their core competencies, or their different expertise (Karila & Kupila, 2010; Onnismaa, 2005; Sirviö et al., 2023).

Methods

Research questions

The aim of this study is to find out which experiences have been significant in shaping the professional identity of ECEC teachers and thus deepen the understanding of the nature of professional identity. The research questions are as follows: What types of identity narratives can be identified from the interview narratives of ECEC teachers? How do ECEC teachers position themselves in these narratives?

Participants

The research material was collected in January-February 2020 by interviewing six ECEC teachers. The interviewees were selected to represent the different career stages and educational backgrounds of Finnish ECEC teachers. Participants were from two different

municipalities in six different ECEC centers. Author 1 contacted potential interviewees directly by email and conducted the interviews. The interviewees were contacted by introducing the topic and purpose of the study. In addition, they were informed about the ethical principles of the research participants and the data protection regarding the storage and usability of the material. The educational backgrounds of the interviewed teachers were diverse as were their work experiences (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 ECEC teachers who participated in the study and their background information.

CAREER STAGE AND WORK EXPERIENCE	*NARRATOR*	*EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND*
Novice teachers;1–2 years of experience	Riina	University of applied sciences
	Vilma	Bachelor's degree in ECEC
Middle career teachers; 10–15 years of experience	Kaisa	Bachelor's degree in ECEC
	Laura	University of applied sciences
Late expert career teachers; 30-40 years of experience	Maikki	New form of kindergarten teacher training (ULO)
	Hannele	Kindergarten teacher college

The participants worked in different ECEC centers. The diverse educational background (see e.g., Onnismaa, Kalliala, et al., 2017), as well as the varying ages, diverse professional generations (see Karila & Kupila, 2010), and the amount of work experience resonates with the more general situation in Finnish ECEC. The participants were the only teachers in their group and worked in a multiprofessional teams with ECEC nurses and group assistants. In this research report, the participants' names are pseudonymized.

Narrative interviews

We tell stories to understand, structure and give meaning to our experiences and the world around us (King et al., 2019). Bamberg (2011, 2012) defines narratives structured through a series of events that operate through space and time. The structure of the narrative keeps the content of the narrative, the plot, together and parses the sections of the story into a coherent whole (Bamberg, 2012). An individual builds their self through narration (Bamberg, 2012; Bruner, 1990; Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Fraser, 2004). Thus, narratives are also tools for professional growth and the building of a professional identity. Since professional identity is seen as a process that arises from interaction and builds on prior knowledge and understanding (Bamberg, 2012; Esteban-Guitart, 2012), the narrative interview was considered a relevant way to collect material about professional identity.

The goal of the interviews was to offer a possibility for the interviewees to narrate their own career stories in the most versatile and comprehensive manner as possible. The material was collected using narrative interviews without a precisely structured framework, as they are a typical method to achieve this goal (see e.g., Hyvärinen, 2017). The interviews were conducted by the first author in a familiar environment at the subjects' workplaces or at home. In the beginning of the interviews, the interviewer explained the purpose of the research to the interviewee, emphasizing that the interest at this moment is focused on the teacher's own story. The interviews continued with requesting the teacher to tell their story about how they became an ECEC teacher. In the interview examples in this research report, cut offs are marked with the sign "- -" and the breaks in the narration with "...".

During the interviews, the interviewer aimed to deepen the stories with follow-up questions, such as requesting concrete examples of the experiences brought up by the interviewee or picking up the subject the narrator brought up before the narration stopped (see Hyvärinen, 2017, p. 191). Fraser (2004) emphasizes that the aim is to avoid overinterpretation by reflecting on, for example, bodily reactions and expressed emotions, which also help to provide clues in support of the interpretation. The interviewer has influenced the construction of the narratives with their own reactions in the interaction situation (see e.g., King et al., 2019). The interviews were audio-recorded, leading to a total of 4 hours and 38 minutes of recorded data (64 pages transcribed).

Analysis

In this study, the narratives of the ECEC teachers were analyzed by applying narrative analysis (see Fraser, 2004; Riessman, 2008). At first, the first author made notes on how the stories began and ended, as this method allows making the first conclusions about the nature of the stories (Fraser, 2004). For example, the beginning of Maikki's story gives a hint of the importance of a life experience and career as part of a teacher's identity story: *"So, like, I already have a long story…"*.

Labov's (1972) model of the complete narrative structure was used as a heuristic tool to identify the plot of the stories: 1*) a summary,* in which the narrator summarizes the topic of the narrative, *2) orientation,* where the elements (such as the venue, time, and the participants) of the story are presented, *3) complicated action*, which tells what really happened in the story, *4) evaluation*, which refers to the sections in the interview where the narrator evaluates the significance and importance of an activity or event, 5) *resolution*, which is the point showing how the story ended, and *6) coda*, which returns the narration to the present. Using Labov's model, the long interview narratives were

divided into small stories, which allowed for an in-depth analysis of these stories through Bamberg's (2011, 2012) theory of positioning.

After dividing the narratives into short stories, the focus shifted to the key themes, metaphors, and the characters in the stories. In addition, the directions, repetitions, and pauses in the narrative, which often reveal the significance of the story (Fraser, 2004; Hänninen, 2018), were analyzed. Furthermore, the first author looked at the passages in the story where the narrator moved on to the presidency and used direct quotations. These can be seen as a sign to invite the audience to the same experience, making the passage meaningful (Riessman, 2008, p. 112–113). The narratives also revealed clear turning points or highlights, often related to significant experiences in shaping teachers' professional identities.

In the following phase of the analysis, identity narration was examined through positioning (see Bamberg, 2011, 2012). Positioning refers to the rights and obligations the narrator gives to the people in the narrative, and the activities the narrator uses to draw the people to the report (Bamberg, 2012; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). In Bamberg's (2011) theory, the narrator positions themself and other people in the narrative on three levels. First, the narrator positions themself in relation to the other people in the story, which is positioning at the level of the story. These relational aspects of the story illustrate experiences related to other people (Fraser, 2004). Relational positioning manifests itself in evaluating the identity through sameness versus difference (Bamberg, 2012). Second, the narrator positions themself in relation to the audience and listener of the story, which enables analyzing the narrator's role; whether they are an active actor in the story or the object of the others' actions. Third, the narrator positions their own identity either through a lens of permanence or change over time (Bamberg, 2012), aiming to answer the question of who they are.

Besides, positioning is done in relation to cultural master narratives (Deppermann, 2013). By looking at the cultural and structural aspects it is possible to detect how the structural factors in society, such as power relations and laws, affect identity narratives. This was guided by the question "How does a narrator position their feelings about themself and their identity as filtered by dominant discourses or master narratives?" (Bamberg, 2012). Thus, the relationship between the individuals' identity narratives and cultural master narratives becomes visible (Esteban-Guitart, 2012; Fraser, 2004).

Finally, the teachers' stories were compared by looking at their differences and resemblances. This comparison highlighted the characteristics typical for the identity stories, common experiences, but also exceptional stories. Through this comparison, the story types were created and named. We could identify three diverse story types in the

ECEC teachers' interviews in narrating their professional identity: biographical stories, value stories and interaction stories.

Ethical considerations

A characteristic feature of narrative research is the opportunity of the research participants to express themselves in their own voices and to become heard (Hänninen 2018, p. 204). This ethical dignity is cherished in this study, and in interviews based on informed consent and voluntariness, the starting point has been the interviewees' own stories as they have wanted to tell them in the interview situation. The participants also had the opportunity to refuse and withdraw from the study at any stage. Information of the participants' backgrounds, which is not relevant to the research questions, is not presented in the research report. Individual identity narratives have not been reported in their entirety, but the story types presented in the research report combine several different narratives. It is important to understand that the narratives are always versions of reality told at that moment, colored by the parties' feelings and interpretations, not objective descriptions of reality (Hyvärinen, 2017, p. 190–191; Riessman, 2008). Narratives must always be viewed as information filtered by social interaction, language, and cultural factors (Esteban-Guitart, 2012). In this study, the goal is not objective truth, but a credible description of the construction of the ECEC teachers' professional identity in the way they have told it in the interview situation.

The dominant discourses and model stories guide our thinking and, thereby, the structure of the narrative (Esteban-Guitart, 2012). In a narrative approach, the normalization of identity can be a challenge as it affects what is generally acceptable to tell, which can lead to the narratives not being representative (Denzin 1992, p. 27). This unrepresentativeness of the story, combined with the influence of normative model stories on identity, influences what the narrator tells or fails to tell (Hänninen 2018, p. 205). The stories told in research interviews, like in this study, are seldom complete narratives conforming to the Labov's model. Therefore, this study focuses on the narrators' meaning making. However, Labov's model was useful in understanding the main lines and story types of the interview material (see e.g., Patterson, 2013).

Findings

Based on the analysis, three story types of ECEC teachers' professional identity were identified; *1) Biographical stories, 2) Value stories* and *3) Interaction stories.* These are described in Table 2. In Biographical stories, the ECEC teachers described chronologically their own path towards being an ECEC professional and their current job, starting from childhood and ending in the present. Value stories are reflections on the personal and professional ideas of what makes a good teacher, and what the individual values in their own teaching. In Interaction stories, teachers engage in identity negotiations and reflect on their own position as teachers when questioned by master narrative or by other ECEC professionals.

TABLE 2 The identified story types and features.

STORY TYPE	*CONTENT AND FEATURES OF THE STORY*
BIOGRAPHICAL STORIES	• Positioning through staying the same or changing (see Bamberg, 2012). • Individual life events, such as childhood, studies, becoming a mother and different jobs as shapers of identity. • Narration about life events and jobs chronologically and linearly (see Labov, 1972) • Orientation in the past.
VALUE STORIES	• Positioning through being the passive object or active agency (see Bamberg, 2012). • Mirroring and comparing oneself with the environment, other members of the work community, especially through one's own values. • Talking about important principles, personal and professional values. • Active evaluation (see Labov, 1972) of one's own and others' pedagogical activities. Articulating one's own strengths and areas for development. • Describing the ideal self; orientation in the future. • Emotionally loaded and evaluative narration (see Labov, 1972).
INTERACTION STORIES	• Positioning through similarity or difference (see Bamberg, 2012). • Negotiations of own position at the level of the work team, work organization or society. • Emphasis on describing complicated actions (see Labov, 1972). • Unclear expectations for one's own position, being questioned triggers identity negotiations. • Orientation in the present moment.

Biographical stories

In the biographical stories, the construction of a teacher's identity was particularly evident in the negotiation of one's own position through the dimension of staying the same and change (see Bamberg, 2011, 2012). The hallmark of the story was the depiction of the life cycle from childhood to the present, and the stories were easily identifiable by their chronological and linear plot (see Labov, 1972). The biographical story began from childhood, that is, when a teacher had for the first time faced the idea of enjoying working with children in the future:

> Kaisa: *I've known since I was a child that I want to work with children - - already back then, I got feedback that I take children into account wonderfully. I just liked children so much already back then.*

Childhood and adolescent experiences of working with children, encouraging feedback at a young age, and warm sibling relationships had supported the decision to work with children.

The biographical story continued with a description of applying for ECEC teacher education. Teachers with bachelor's degree in ECEC, Kaisa and Vilma, emphasized the importance of the formal ECEC teacher education in the process of forming a professional identity. Teachers emphasized the identity change during their studies, and the study period was illustrated as an "eye-opening period" that changed their thinking and constructed their professional identity. Vilma's narration reveals a master narrative of teaching, where a teacher is someone who operates in the classroom setting with the older children, making a distinction between an ECEC teacher and a "real teacher". The time studying became the turning point of Vilma's identity story:

> Vilma: *I just applied to study to become an ECEC teacher, I didn't even apply to become a real teacher. I just thought that I'm a full professional before I went to the university… But then, upon studying I realized that I don't know anything at all. It taught me so much, about everything - - and then to become a real teacher.*

The biographical stories of those with long careers, Hannele and Maikki, in turn, emphasized their long career and life experience instead of formal education. The experienced teachers often used comparative expressions of time, such as "nowadays" and "back then". The core content of their biographical stories was in the changes in teacher education, society, and childhood. Remembrance and narration breaks were typical of their stories - the orientation was in the past:

> Maikki: *What studying was at that time - - it was more like just lectures…not like such interactive - - compared to the present day when it's much like the student does and is responsible by themself. And you work in groups.*

The experienced teachers felt that although the working life and environment in ECEC has changed, their core values have remained the same, albeit slightly polished. Additionally, the stories told the reshaping of one's own professional identity, as the end of Maikki's story showed via the change in her thinking:

> Maikki: *Such societal development that has occurred in forty years, I can see it - - it was highly adult-led - - first all twenty children sat in the bench, then they were told what to do - - Then all [children] went to do it at the same time - - but it was the operating culture of that time. Now it feels totally crazy that we did it that way.*

In all the teachers' stories, the first years of work had been a significant time for the formation of the professional identity. The good atmosphere of the workplaces, the co-operation, and the receptivity of the young teacher's ideas had been experiences that strengthened their professional identities. Gaining responsibility and autonomy to accomplish oneself and what one feels is right in one's work was important for the teachers. In the early years of their careers all interviewees had worked in various ECEC units and seeing different ways of working had helped to build their own professional identities:

> Laura: *The overall view, that I visited in various places, it was really teaching. I got sort of different styles, or I saw that this worked in this way and that worked well in that situation.*

The influence of parenthood in the process of professional identity formation was characterized by a comparison of oneself before and after motherhood. The participants considered that parenthood had taught how different and unique children are. In addition, alongside parenting the children's world had become more familiar. Their own parenthood had shaped the teachers' attitudes towards how to work with parents:

> Vilma: *My own child taught really much. I started to understand parents much better. When before I've always thought that "oh boy, what does that one whine that the child can't take a nap"…that now I understand.*

The biographical stories continued with a description of the teacher's current job. After the difficulties, teachers had become assured being a teacher was the right choice for their career. The feedback received from children, as well as the autonomy to fulfill oneself through one's work, were important forces for teachers that supported their commitment to work. Maikki's *coda* reveals the duality of identity, that is, the interplay between remaining the same and the change of identity:

> Maikki: *It really is a long process…it's a bit like rocks in the beach and as waves lave them eventually they become round pebbles - - And occasionally you get buried in the mud, but…I think I'm surely quite teflon.*

The biographical stories revealed the constructionist nature of professional identity, that it is fundamentally constructed as temporal process and transformation.

Value stories

In the value stories, teachers shaped their professional selves by evaluating the importance of their own personal and professional values and what they considered meaningful in the work of a teacher (see Labov, 1972). In the value stories, professional identity was reflected through normative similarity (see Bamberg, 2012), i.e., illustrating what every ECEC teacher should be like:

> Hannele: *What I consider important is empathy. Everybody in this field should have such a strong emotional intelligence.*

In the value stories the teachers' narration turned to their values and ethical principles. Both professional and personal values emerged in the narrators' stories. Professional values were shared collegially among other members of the work community and were based on curriculum and laws that guide ECEC. The narrators mirrored themselves to the master narratives provided by the environment regarding what a good teacher is like. In the stories, strong ethical agency was visible: "it matters to me", "I wish," and "I want to be" were highlighted when talking about one's own ethical commitments in teachers' stories. The narrators mirrored the prevailing practices against their professional values, goals, and skills and questioned the present day ECEC institutional practices. They actively shaped their own professional identity by reflecting on their activities and professional environment:

> Laura: *I'd rather be out there doing things with them [children], then a lot of time is taken up with everything else...*

Whereas the biographical stories continued throughout the interviews and included many series of life events, the value stories were shorter but more emotional. The teachers' professional values could be interpreted through the emotions they conveyed, reflecting what is important to the narrator in their work and in their own role*:*

> Riina: *I was for a while at a private [kindergarten] - - but no, I didn't like it and I left as soon as the trial period was coming to an end - - The idea that business is done there for the sake of business and not for the sake of the children could be seen everywhere.*

The value stories were often narrated as turning points in the teachers' narratives; they had had to act against their own professional identity, and, through a conflict of values, they had ended up looking for work elsewhere. These stories attached to turning points in the narrative of professional identity, where an active agency is highlighted. The turning point in Maikki's story was when she decided to leave her employer after nearly

30 years of working. The operating culture no longer corresponded to Maikki's values of how she wanted to work as a teacher:

> Maikki: *The operational culture changed quite a lot over the years, that I felt that children were seen as numbers - - when you're on the evening shift, you have five lists of children's names in your hand…then a parent comes, you don't know who they're coming to pick up - - I wonder which one of these children here and in which group the child is…it's not really my thing.*

The stories emphasized social discourses and the stories were linked to macro-level narratives, with the narrator positioning themself against the decisions of the decision-makers. This was reflected in the teachers' narrative in terms of how they position themselves in relation to policy decisions or master narratives about teachers:

> Hannele: *The decisions of society, or of the decision-makers. They also have quite a lot to do with what I think about my work - - in my opinion, it's not going in the right direction at all.*

In the value stories, work cultures seen during their careers contradicted with their own professional values and functioned as a reflection space against which their own, differing professional identity was constructed. The teachers often narrated their experiences through mirroring how they did not want to act as a teacher or what they did not want to become, emphasizing the difference between themselves and others at work:

> Kaisa: *On the very first day, I noticed that there was a really strange atmosphere. And then just the kind of strange attitude towards children…in that workplace I thought really "this can't be true".*

The value stories mirrored strong ECEC experts who during their teacher studies and careers had developed a strong ethical awareness of personal and ECEC legislative professional values that guided their work. The value stories emphasized, above all, the narrator's close relationship with the children and what is best for them. The narrators constructed their identity through positioning themselves as passive targets or active actors (see Bamberg, 2012). However, all the teachers were confident in their own expertise, which was reflected in the value stories as active activism and confidence in the future. In the value stories teachers were bold actors and did not fall victim to circumstances, instead striving to change their professional environment to support their professional identity.

Interaction stories

The *interaction stories* emphasized interactions, such as with members of the work team and work community. Professional identity was built through identity negotiations in relation to colleagues and the work community. The plot of the stories was focused on narrating complicated actions in detail (see Labov, 1972). This story type exposes whether the teacher is on the same side with the members of their work community, experiencing similarity, or whether they are different from the rest of the work community (see Bamberg, 2011, 2012). For example, Kaisa narrated her strong commitment to see children as active participants and learners in a manner emphasizing dissociation and dissimilarity in relation to other teachers encountered along her career using negation:

> *Kaisa: I'm not the kind of teacher who tells to sit at a table and "now take a pen and do something". And I'm not the kind of person who makes children sit in a chair with their legs straight.*

These stories were characterized by questioning of the narrator's professional role and identity from outsiders and reflecting the wider macro-level struggle over the role of the teacher in the workplace and their team. The typical characters in the interaction stories were opponents, i.e., co-workers who were more experienced than the narrator or representatives of another profession. The stories had a strong emotional load. Opponents were often described as negative, strong, and stubborn and narrators set themselves clearly apart from their opponents:

> Hannele: *They [co-workers] were just so bored with the work and nothing was done with the children, so when I started planning a music session as an enthusiastic new graduate: "oh, so you're really going to start planning such a music session". So terribly negative! I quit after half a year.*

While in the value stories the narrators evaluated themselves in relation to the ethical standards and tensions between themselves and their institutions, in the interaction stories the evaluation was directed at the teachers from outside, igniting identity negotiations in them. Central to the stories was the emphasis on negotiating position through opponents or partners:

> Vilma: *You get a kind of "well should we dare to let you out in the yard with those kids" - - but then when you tell them that you've got a degree, their attitude changes a lot so that they appreciate you a lot more.*

The interaction stories revealed that the interactions between the members of the work community have a strong effect, either by questioning or strengthening the teacher's professional identity. The study participants were the only teachers in their child group.

The lack of teacher collegiality could be seen as challenging to the teachers' professional identity in two different ways. First, as young teachers, they would have liked a good teacher model and support for their work, for example through mentoring. Kaisa described how teacher collegiality would have supported the development of her professional identity, especially in the early years of her career:

> Kaisa: *The other teacher's colleagueship - - yes, I think that it is good. Not to devalue the training of ECEC nurses, but they don't simply have all the knowledge. I do have the experience from my career that I would have longed for a top model too.*

Second, there were no day-to-day interactions with a teacher colleague at work. This lack of collegial interaction can challenge development at work, as Clement and Vanderberghe (2000) have stated. In their identity narratives, the teachers were cautious to narrate their roles in their team in the context of tensions in the field.

In the interaction stories, the narrator's professional identity had become called into question by another person's or cultural master narrative. Hannele began her narrative by saying that she is "old-fashioned kindergarten teacher", making a distinction between herself and how she sees ECEC teachers today. In the narrative, Hannele referred to a master narrative of today's university educated ECEC teachers that she felt was questioning her own professional identity, which shows the social macro-level tensions at the level of her narration.

> Hannele: *I'm a kindergarten teacher, totally the old-fashioned kind - - first of all, this [work] has become much more demanding from the theoretical side, which I myself criticize a lot.*

The teachers described their emotions, and their stories reflected their frustration. Although one's own education is a clear building block of the professional identity for oneself, others in the work community did not always recognize what is the core area of teacher's competence, as Kaisa described:

> Kaisa: *Seriously, I've been studying this for many years, so I'm not some person wondering around with a pen and notebook, just scribbling something.*

However, as teachers narrate their current team, they emphasize a good atmosphere, smooth cooperation, and similarity. In this respect, the contradictory nature of identity is revealed. The teachers' professional identity is built in a continuous dialogue in professional interactions. In the interaction stories the ECEC teachers described their own position in their work community in somewhat contradictory and evaluative ways.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to find out how ECEC teachers narrate their professional identity and what experiences are meaningful in building the professional identity. Three different stories, the Biographical stories, the Value stories, and the Interaction stories could be identified from the narration of the participants, which describe the narration of the teachers' identities and the construction of professional identity. The biographical stories formed the plot of the teachers' identity narratives, in which sequences of events followed one after another in the narrators' lives, reflecting the impact of formal education on the change in teachers' identities. Indeed, education has been found to be an essential part of the formation of professional identities (see e.g., Heggen & Terum, 2017; Tahkokallio, 2014). The teachers must build a professional identity amid changes in time, society, and the field of ECEC, permanence of identity and requires openness to newness and change. In this case, identity is told in biographical stories through both staying the same and changing (see Bamberg, 2012).

The stories were indeed two-sided, with different generations of ECEC professionals narrating their identity in different ways. This parallels Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto's (2011) interpretation of the somewhat stable nature of professional identity, which may affect a professional's position in relation to changes in working life. Learning and development at work are linked to changes in identity and identity negotiations. In other words, if the identity remains unchanged in organizational changes, it is difficult for a professional to commit to change and for an expert to adopt new practices (Eteläpelto et al., 2014). In the biographical stories, the experiences of the early years workplaces and seeing many operating cultures has been relevant to the teachers in the process of identity formation. The transition to working life is indeed a particularly important time in the formation of professional identity (Karila & Kupila, 2010; Onnismaa, Tahkokallio, et al., 2017). Considering this, it would be crucial for the ECEC organizations to invest in these early career stages by providing teachers with peer support to promote their professional identity construction.

The value stories included a description of the teachers' values: what was important to them in their own work. This was reflected in the teachers' narrative in terms of how they position themselves in relation to policy decisions or master narratives about the ECEC teachers. The stories were strongly future-oriented, as the teachers outlined their future selves and considered the ethical dilemmas that guided their professional selves. In the value stories, narration was linked to the moral nature of the teachers' work and professional ethics (see Niikko & Korhonen, 2021). The teachers emphasized the importance of being able to do their job well and within the interests of children, while constantly holding identity negotiations in relation to the ideal and the real resources of

working life. This is in line with the previous research showing that teachers often cannot do their pedagogical work as well as they would like (Hjelt & Karila, 2017; Kangas et al., 2022; Sirviö et al., 2023). It seems that ECEC teachers face contradictions in their identity negotiations in the same way as classroom teachers, who feel that often the ideal of what they perceive as good and important in their own work experiences a clash with the prevailing reality and resources (see Eteläpelto et al., 2015).

The value stories were related to social master discourses and were linked to a political context, signifying that the professionals need to be capable to position themself against the decisions of decision-makers on macro-level. Considering that the intensification of work and the conflicting expectations set for ECEC work create tensions in ECEC practitioners work (Hjelt, 2023; Sirviö et al., 2023; Ukkonen-Mikkola et al., 2020), value stories illustrate ECEC teachers' balancing with their own values and the realities of their intense workload.

In the interaction stories the teachers described themselves primarily through different roles and positions. Social discourses and tensions in the field were present in the stories, as the teachers positioned themselves in relation to other professionals. The teachers distinguished between the younger or older colleagues, other professional groups, and the teachers with different educational backgrounds. The experience of difference is an important part of identity, in which case the individual can reflect and question the norms and practices prevailing in the community in isolation from others (Tahkokallio, 2014). However, the interaction stories illustrate how unclear job descriptions force different professional groups to negotiate their work tasks in everyday work, which in turn challenges professional identities.

The purpose of this study was not to obtain generalizable results on the identity of teachers, but to display the various dimensions of professional identity construction. The limitation of the study is the small number of participants, as the analysis is based only on six ECEC teachers' narratives. Furthermore, the ECEC teachers reflected on their professional identities from diverse time perspectives, thus the emphasis in memories of the past being different. Yet, the commonalities in the storylines of all teachers' narratives as well as shared reflections between the researchers during the analysis process enhance the credibility of the findings. The similarities between the participants also show the cultural and social nature of professional identity construction (see Jenkins, 2014), although the limitations are good to keep in mind when considering the transferability of the findings. Because the narratives were retrospective and only from one time point, in the future, to gain a broader understanding of the construction of the professional identity of ECEC teachers, longitudinal approach to study ECEC teachers at different stages of their career could be utilized in research.

The teachers' narration and stories were emotion laden, and this relationship between the emotions and identity processes is recognized in other teaching contexts as well (see Ursin et al., 2020; Vähäsantanen, 2015; Vähäsantanen & Hämäläinen, 2019). The study participants were also the only teachers in their teams. In the future, it would be important to study the importance of teacher collegiality and the lack of it in shaping the professional identity of ECEC teachers. In this study, work roles and interactions with the members of the work community were central to the formation of teachers' professional identities. In this case, tensions and power relations also arose, as previous research suggests (e.g. Sirviö et al., 2023). In the future, it would be relevant to investigate how interpretations of multidisciplinarity affect the identity negotiations of ECEC teachers.

Professional identity has a dimension of stability (see Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). In the era of continuous change, it would be important to study the strategies used by ECEC teachers to tolerate the constant changes in the field, and how they negotiate their identities within it. As also shown in teachers' identity narration, the construction of professional identity is an evolving and changing process throughout one's life and career.

Conclusion

In our study, the core value of acting in the best interests of the child is an important part of identity formation for ECEC teachers, but the conflict between this value and existing resources and efficiency requirements challenges teachers' identity work. Identity is always built relationally in multidisciplinary encounters, and thus, it would be important to consider how the professional identities of different professional groups working in ECEC are supported in pre-service education and in working life of ECEC. In terms of professional identity, professional agency, that is, the opportunity to act in accordance with professional ethics and one's values in collaboration with a multiprofessional team and colleagues, plays an important role.

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